

MONTGOMERY WARD AND COMPANY WAREHOUSE

618 WEST CHICAGO AVENUE
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

PRELIMINARY STAFF SUMMARY OF INFORMATION
SUBMITTED TO THE
COMMISSION ON CHICAGO HISTORICAL AND
ARCHITECTURAL LANDMARKS

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MONTGOMERY WARD AND COMPANY WAREHOUSE
618 West Chicago Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

Architect: Schmidt, Garden and Martin

Date Completed: 1908

Banding the curve of the Chicago River as it branches north stands the Montgomery Ward and Company Warehouse, a building whose imposing and dignified presence belies its strictly commercial use. Noted architectural historian Carl Condit, in *The Chicago School of Architecture*, judged that, "This building stands by itself as one of the most powerful works of utilitarian architecture that our building art has produced." Designed by Schmidt, Garden and Martin and completed in 1908, the structure served to house the manifold activities involved in conducting the enormous and successful mail order catalogue business which had been founded in Chicago in 1872 by Aaron Montgomery Ward.

The Company and its Founder

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the idea of mail order selling was one whose time had come, but it would take the Yankee ingenuity and spirited entrepreneurship of A. Montgomery Ward to turn the concept into a thriving and respectable industry. Why did Ward succeed? According to Daniel J. Boorstin, who detailed the history of the company and its founder in *Chicago History* (Spring-Summer, 1973), it was because he combined "a Methodist minister's feeling for old-time, old-fashioned morality with a go-getting businessman's feeling for new methods and new markets." Born on February 17, 1843 in Chatham, New Jersey to parents of modest means, Ward obtained a rudimentary public school education in Niles, Michigan where his father operated a shoe shop. His fledgling career included being a cobbler's apprentice as well as a laborer in a barrel factory and brick yard. In 1862, Ward moved to St. Joseph, Michigan where he clerked in a general store. Although within three years he became store manager, he abandoned this position in 1866 and went to Chicago to seek his fortune. For two years he was a \$12 a week clerk

for the leading Chicago retailer, Field, Palmer and Leiter. Later, in St. Louis, he obtained a position with Walter M. Smith and Company, a dry goods wholesaler that sent him to market its goods to country stores.

It was as a traveling salesman that Ward obtained a first-hand knowledge of the retailing climate of rural America and the wants and needs of the country consumer. In *Chicago-Creating New Traditions* (Chicago Historical Society, 1976) historian Perry Duis explains:

Because his territory included hundreds of small towns, he became very familiar with the buying habits of the rustics. He noted their dependence on local merchants who extended credit as a means of retaining patrons that might otherwise have been driven away by high prices. Ward also understood the nature of rural hostility to the city, where invisible commodities markets determined prices and railway barons set their exorbitant rates. Ward realized that thousands of miles of railway extended out in all directions from Chicago. If he could travel hundreds of towns as a salesman, why not ship things there by rail.

Imbued with his new idea of a mail order store and determined to make it work, Ward returned to Chicago and went to work for the C.W. & E. Partridge Company, a State Street merchant of dry goods, notions, and carpets. Meanwhile he saved his money, gradually accumulated merchandise, and broached the plan to skeptical friends who were unanimously convinced that he was facing economic disaster by attempting to peddle merchandise sight unseen to far-flung customers. Finally, however, despite the loss of his first inventory in the Chicago Fire of 1871, Ward with \$1,600 in capital and the assistance of two fellow employees from Partridge's opened a small office in Chicago's McCormick Block. The date was August, 1872. The first catalogue issued was a simple, one-page sheet listing 163 items costing a \$1.00 or less. The items ranged from practical necessities such as red flannel and wool socks to such niceties as lace curtains and hemstitched handkerchiefs. Ward's burgeoning business received a special impetus when he formed a loose affiliation with the Patrons of Husbandry, a fraternal and lobbying organization designed to aid farmers and more commonly known as The Grange. Ward found a ready and receptive market in its hundreds of thousands of members. By 1874 Montgomery Ward and Company was a secure and flourishing enterprise with sales that year of \$100,000 and the appearance of the first bound 24-page catalogue. By 1887 sales reached \$1 million, and the credibility and integrity of the mail order catalogue house was firmly ensconced in America's retail history.

Despite a market of millions, Ward never lost his simple homespun philosophy of salesmanship. He believed in honesty, good value, and guaranteed satisfaction. Amazingly, he was able to establish a personal rapport with his customers who along with their orders would often write him detailed letters. One example follows:

I suppose you wonder why we haven't ordered anything from you since last fall. Well, the cow kicked my arm and broke it, and besides my wife was sick, and there was the doctor bill. But now, thank God, that is paid,

and we are all well again, and we have a fine new baby boy, and please send plush bonnet number 29d8077.

Accompanying the plush bonnet was a letter from Ward's congratulating the farmer on the birth of his son, saying they were pleased he and his wife were finally restored to good health and, last but not least, pointing out that the farmer might wish to consider purchasing an anti-cow kicker listed in the current catalogue. Ward's catalogue was his principal sales tool, and it had to compete with the one-on-one sales pitch of the country store proprietor. Ward was fortunate in being able to capitalize on the late nineteenth-century advances in typesetting, printing, and color and photographic reproduction. This made the catalogue much more than just a glossy advertisement. It gave precise, vivid descriptions and illustrations of the product, thus assuring the customer that he would get exactly what he had ordered and paid for. In 1946 the Grolier Club, a New York society of book lovers, included the Montgomery Ward catalogue in their selection of one hundred books chosen for their influence on American life. The selection committee noted:

The mail order catalogue has been perhaps the greatest single influence in increasing the standard of American middle-class living. It brought the benefit of wholesale prices to city and hamlet, to cross-roads and the prairies; it inculcated cash payment as against crippling credit; it urged millions of housewives to bring into their homes and place upon their backs and in their shelves and on their floors creature comforts which otherwise they could never have hoped for; and above all, it substituted sound quality for shoddy . . .

The catalogue also unexpectedly fulfilled another need of the hinterland. It was an instrument of education. With a scarcity of textbooks in country schoolhouses, it could be used to teach reading and spelling. Arithmetic could be learned by filling out orders and adding up items and geography lessons culled from the catalogue's postal-zone maps. It was an encyclopedia of new technology and up-to-date fashion. Indeed, the mail order catalogue became a fixture in American farm life. Practically speaking, it was superseded only by the Bible in literary importance to agrarian society.

Mail order as a business reached its zenith in the early years of the twentieth century and by World War I, Montgomery Ward and Company had become a quintessential American tradition. A. Montgomery Ward himself died in 1913. His consuming passion in his later years was a crusade to save Chicago's lakefront from commercial development. Because of his unremitting efforts, what is now Grant Park can be considered another of his legacies to the city.

The Warehouse and Its Designers: Schmidt, Garden and Martin

Montgomery Ward and Company rapidly outgrew its original space at 825 Clark Street and in 1873 moved to 159 West Hubbard Street and then again in 1874 to much larger

quarters at 246-254 Kinzie Street. 1876 necessitated still further expansion, and the firm located at 228-230 South Wabash where it remained for the next twelve years. In 1888, the firm purchased a six-story warehouse building on South Michigan Avenue and over the years expanded the facility to meet increasing needs. Most significant was the construction in 1898 of a twelve-story, tower-topped brick, marble, and terra-cotta building at the north-west corner of Michigan Avenue and Madison Street. This commission was given to the architect Richard Schmidt whose draftsman, Hugh Garden, contributed the design. By 1906, however, high real estate costs prohibited further growth there, and the company purchased property along the east bank of the North Branch of the Chicago River. Another important consideration factored into the company's decision to move to the new site in a predominantly industrial neighborhood. This was the immediate accessibility to superb transportation facilities afforded by the natural waterway of the river and the existing network of man-made railroad tracks. Again, the distinguished Chicago firm of Schmidt, Garden and Martin was commissioned to design the new national headquarters.

The lead partner, Richard Ernest Schmidt, was born in Ebern, Bavaria, Germany, on November 14, 1865 and brought up on the Near South Side of Chicago where he attended the Haven School and later the Allen Academy. At the age of sixteen he began a two-year apprenticeship in the office of architects Cudell and Blumenthal. From 1883 to 1885 he studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Returning to Chicago, Schmidt worked in the office of Charles Sumner Frost until 1887 when he began his own practice.

Hugh Mackie Garden was born in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, on July 9, 1873. He graduated from Bishops College at Lennoxville, Canada, at the age of fourteen and that same year emigrated to Minneapolis where he apprenticed with the architect William Channing Whitney. In 1888, he moved to Chicago where he apprenticed first at the office of Flanders and Zimmerman; later he worked for Henry Ives Cobb. Garden next became associated with Shepley, Rutan and Coolidge. In 1893, Garden became a free-lance designer and draftsman, a situation which brought him into contact with both Howard Van Doren Shaw and Frank Lloyd Wright. He started working on a job-by-job basis for Richard Schmidt in 1895.

The cooperative efforts of Schmidt and Garden were formalized in 1906 when, joined by structural engineer Edgar Martin, they organized the architectural firm of Schmidt, Garden and Martin. This long collaboration was to be marked by professional success which was undoubtedly due not only to the mutual esteem and real friendship of Schmidt and Garden, but also by the fortunate complement of their special talents. Richard Schmidt brought business acumen, administrative ability, and important civic and social connections. Garden brought the imagination, inventiveness, and sensitivity of the skilled designer.

The reputation of Schmidt and Garden was founded primarily on their commercial and industrial designs. However, they also produced two noteworthy residential designs, both designated Chicago Landmarks: the Theurer/Wrigley House (1895) at 2466 Lakeview

Avenue, and the Madlener House (1902) at 4 West Burton Place. Their most widely acclaimed commission was the Montgomery Ward and Company Warehouse. Other important works include the Grommes and Ullrich Building (1901), the Schoenhofen Brewery Powerhouse (1902), the Chapin and Gore Building (1904; designated a Chicago Landmark on January 21, 1982), and Michael Reese Hospital (1906). Schmidt came from a family prominent in the medical profession and his architectural firm eventually specialized in hospital design. Schmidt himself authored *The Modern Hospital* (1914) which is now considered a pioneer textbook in hospital design.

The Montgomery Ward and Company Warehouse

Located on Chicago's Near North Side and situated on the east bank of the North Branch of the Chicago River, the Montgomery Ward and Company Warehouse was not intended to be an architectural monument. In fact, it was first lauded as a technological achievement as it was built entirely of reinforced concrete, a fairly new and economical building material at that time. Reinforced concrete was used first and more generally in Europe and came into universal use in the 1890s. Since a reinforced concrete frame had not been used before by Chicago architects, Richard Schmidt relied on German technical publications to calculate the loads carried in the structure. The material was used with a clear recognition of its properties and, when completed, the Montgomery Ward Warehouse was the largest building in the world with a reinforced concrete frame. Chicago was considered a pioneer in the exploitation of its possibilities.

There is no question but that the initial impression of the Montgomery Ward and Company Warehouse is vast. That it had to be so huge was dictated by the economics and exigencies of operating a complex and mammoth mail order business. A building such as this could have disintegrated into an ugly and undisciplined sprawl in less capable hands than those of Schmidt, Garden and Martin. As Carl Condit noted in *The Chicago School of Architecture*, "This immense volume is treated with a boldness, assurance, and directness worthy of the best architects of the Chicago school." Schmidt, Garden and Martin belong to the second phase of Chicago school architects; that is, those whose most important and expert works came principally after 1900. The term "Chicago school of architecture" has been used to designate those Chicago architects primarily responsible for giving fresh and original expression to commercial architecture during the 1880s. This second generation of architects readily learned the lessons of their predecessors but, influenced by Louis Sullivan, they attempted to take architecture a step further. Carl Condit, again in *The Chicago School of Architecture*, analyzes how this is reflected in the work of Schmidt and his associates:

The basic form of his strictly utilitarian buildings was usually derived from the underlying structural frame and thus belonged more to the tradition of Holabird and Roche than to that of Sullivan and Elmslie. But Schmidt was equally interested in the plastic modeling of wall surfaces which he treated in such a way as to give either a vertical or a horizontal emphasis. In this

respect he was working in the new forms that Sullivan, Elmslie, and Wright were developing around the turn of the century. His attitude toward design thus embraced both the expression of a personal idiom and the impersonal revelation of the structure and function of the particular building.

In the Montgomery Ward and Company Warehouse, the architects chose to emphasize the length of the building by accentuating its horizontality. It is this horizontality that gives the building its identity, and the walls are modeled to emphasize this. Between the long rows of windows are continuous spandrels running the extent of the building without interruption. Faced with red brick, the spandrels were designed to create a contrasting band with the concrete piers. For many years, however, the entire building has been painted white. Narrow projecting bands at the tops and bottoms of each spandrel continue to lead the eye along the length of the building. The warehouse is given life by the movement of these horizontal elements, reflected in the river alongside the building.

The design of the warehouse is a good example of "form follows function." The interior reflects the building's use. Natural light for work was essential, and it was a matter of course that broad bands of horizontal windows be incorporated into the design. There are other examples of the architects' following the credo of the form or outside appearance of the building being a statement or clue as to the function or what went on inside the building. A subtle distinction can be seen in the treatment of the first two floors of the building as compared to the remaining six floors. The first two floors were devoted to the operations, i.e. filling and shipping of orders and administration and executive departments, of the business while the rest of the building was devoted to storage. On the first two floors the piers run through both stories and the spandrels are recessed behind the piers. All decorative attention has been focused on these piers and spandrels so as to call attention to the importance of the affairs being conducted on these two floors. Above the emphasis is reversed, and the piers are set behind the spandrels and both are unrelieved by any ornament. After all, this is only storage space which of itself is static, regular, and basically prosaic in nature. Here Schmidt, Garden and Martin have at once let the function of the building dictate its form but also skillfully manipulated the forms to give the building an original and individual expression that has an integrity all on its own. This was the ideal sought after by this second phase of the Chicago school of architecture.

The terra-cotta ornament on the warehouse is used sparingly. The vertical members of the facade culminate in subtle rosette-like forms beneath the parapet of the building. At the third floor, chevron motifs adorn the piers between the windows. The spandrels framing the tops of the first floor openings and entrances are the most noticeable, each incorporating abstract and naturalistic motifs to form a self-contained design. This ornament was not meant to cover up the structural and functional nature of the building but to be subordinate to it. It does not have any specific historical reference, as did much ornament used on buildings of that time, but is Hugh Garden's personal abstraction of Louis Sullivan's organic forms which is now so famous and admired that it is referred to as "Sullivan-esque." However, Garden himself preferred to call his work "Gardenesque." Nevertheless, it does add variety and human scale to such a large structure and additionally signifies to the passerby the importance of the company that occupies the building.

That this building and the work of its architects was appreciated even at the time of its construction is evidenced in an article titled "An American Architecture," written for *The Architectural Record* by William Herbert in 1908. Following are some of his comments on the Montgomery Ward and Company Warehouse:

The new building for Montgomery Ward and Company, . . . is a good example of the demands made upon the resourcefulness of the modern architect. It is essentially a new type. In the first place it is huge . . . Its vast extent and immense bulk towering as well as spreading are unrelieved by courts, either external or internal. In fact, it is a huge aggregation of storage lofts, nine stories high, a repetition of units of a monotony truly appalling. Next, it is entirely of reinforced concrete construction - - foundations, columns, floors and wall all of concrete . . .

We speak of the newness of reinforced concrete construction not as a thing new in this building, but as new in our day compared to the systems of construction of ages past. It is apparent that in a new type of building and with new materials, such as we have described, no adaptation of the old forms of architecture can have any meaning if we care anything for truth in the expression of function and structure.

On walls of such vast expanse cornices are futile; friezes, architraves and balustrades are ridiculous. The great divisions of the building are the horizontal ones, the floors.

Broadly, this is the meaning of the design. It states the facts with perfect candor; of repetition and order it makes rhythm; from monotony it draws repose, and always in its forms it is plastic.

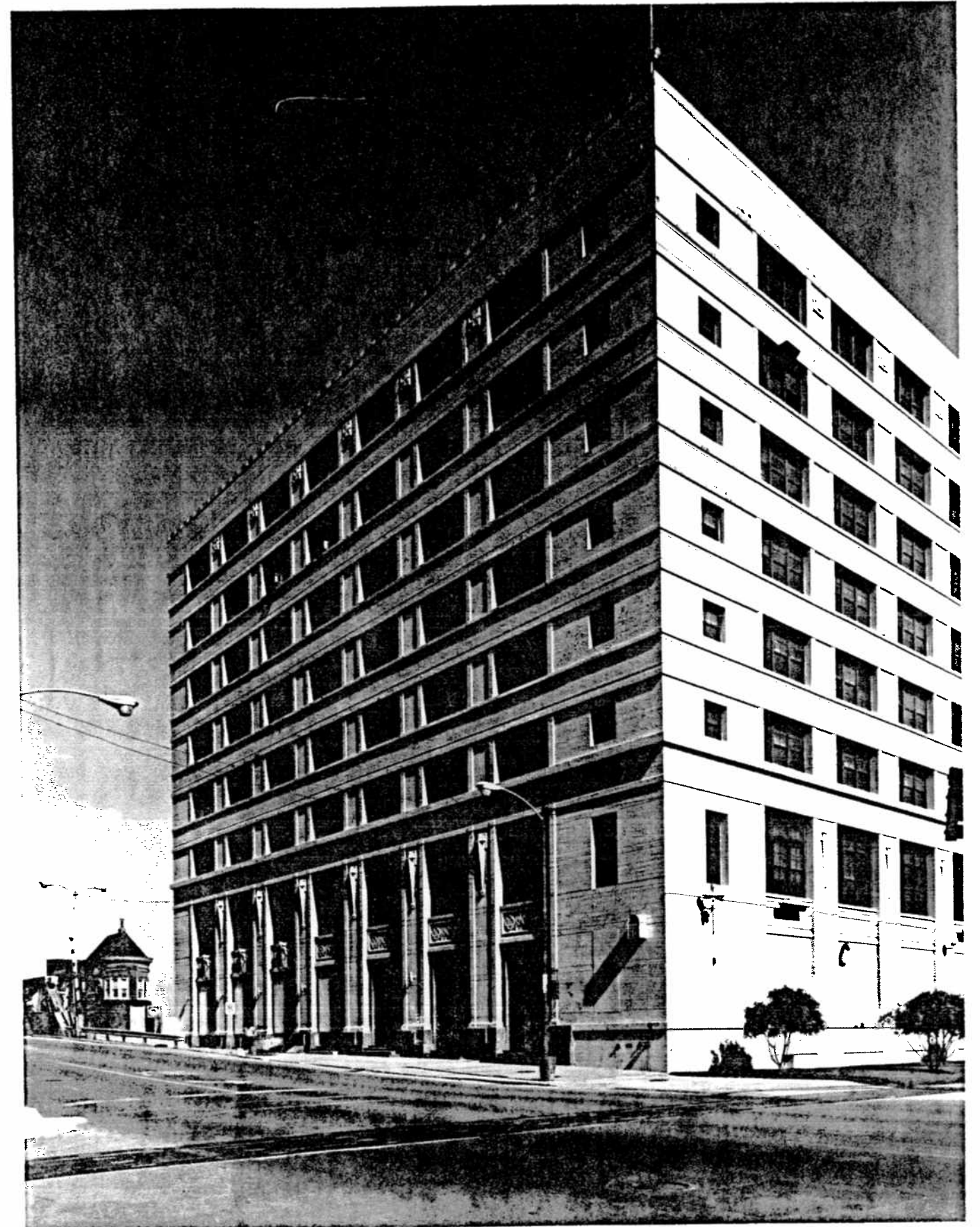
If it is not itself beautiful or graceful, it is at least logical, and tells a plain, unvarnished tale.

Today, the area at Chicago Avenue and the Chicago River has a complex of Montgomery Ward and Company buildings. In 1917 and 1940, two additions were made to the north end of the warehouse itself. Both are in keeping with the original design of the main building. Directly across Chicago Avenue from the warehouse is an Administration Building constructed in 1929. Similar in overall appearance to the warehouse, it was designed by Frank E. Poschenreiter of the company's construction department. In 1974, a sleek modern office tower designed by Minoru Yamasaki and Associates was added to the site on the south side of Chicago Avenue. Yet it is still the 1908 warehouse that remains the dominant structure. A long-standing feature of the riverscape, the building is emblematic of Chicago's importance as a merchandising center and a tribute to the nation's first mail order merchant, A. Montgomery Ward. Although simply a warehouse, it was so carefully crafted that it attains a conscious and distinct architectural expression. Undoubtedly, it is one of Schmidt, Garden and Martin's most masterful executions.

OPPOSITE:

Completed in 1908, the Montgomery Ward and Company Warehouse has long been lauded by architectural historians as one of the premier works of Schmidt, Garden and Martin.

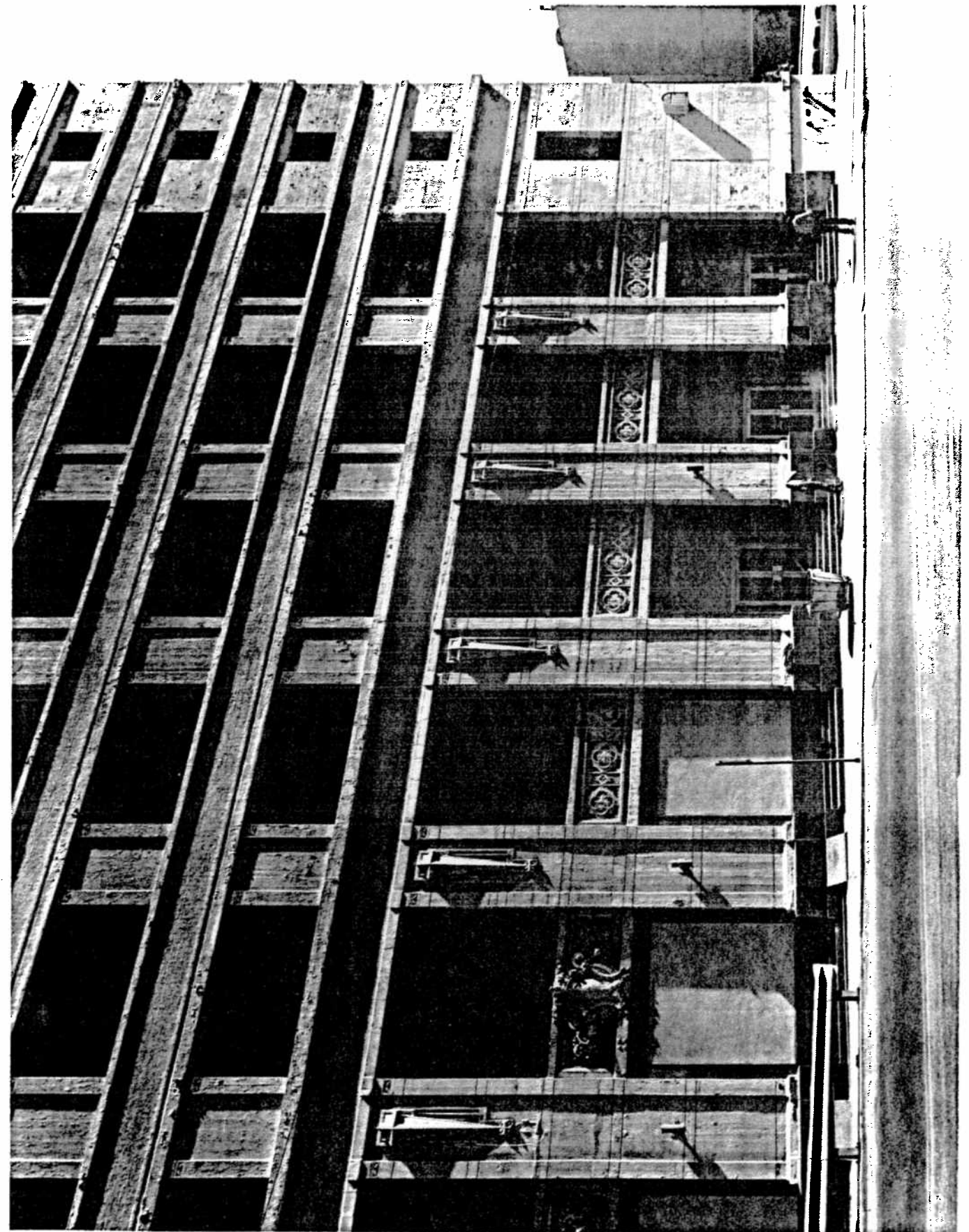
(Bob Thall, photographer)



OPPOSITE:

Deliberate emphasis was given to the first and second floors of the warehouse which housed the processing and administrative functions of the company. Less attention was focused on the remaining floors which served as storage space.

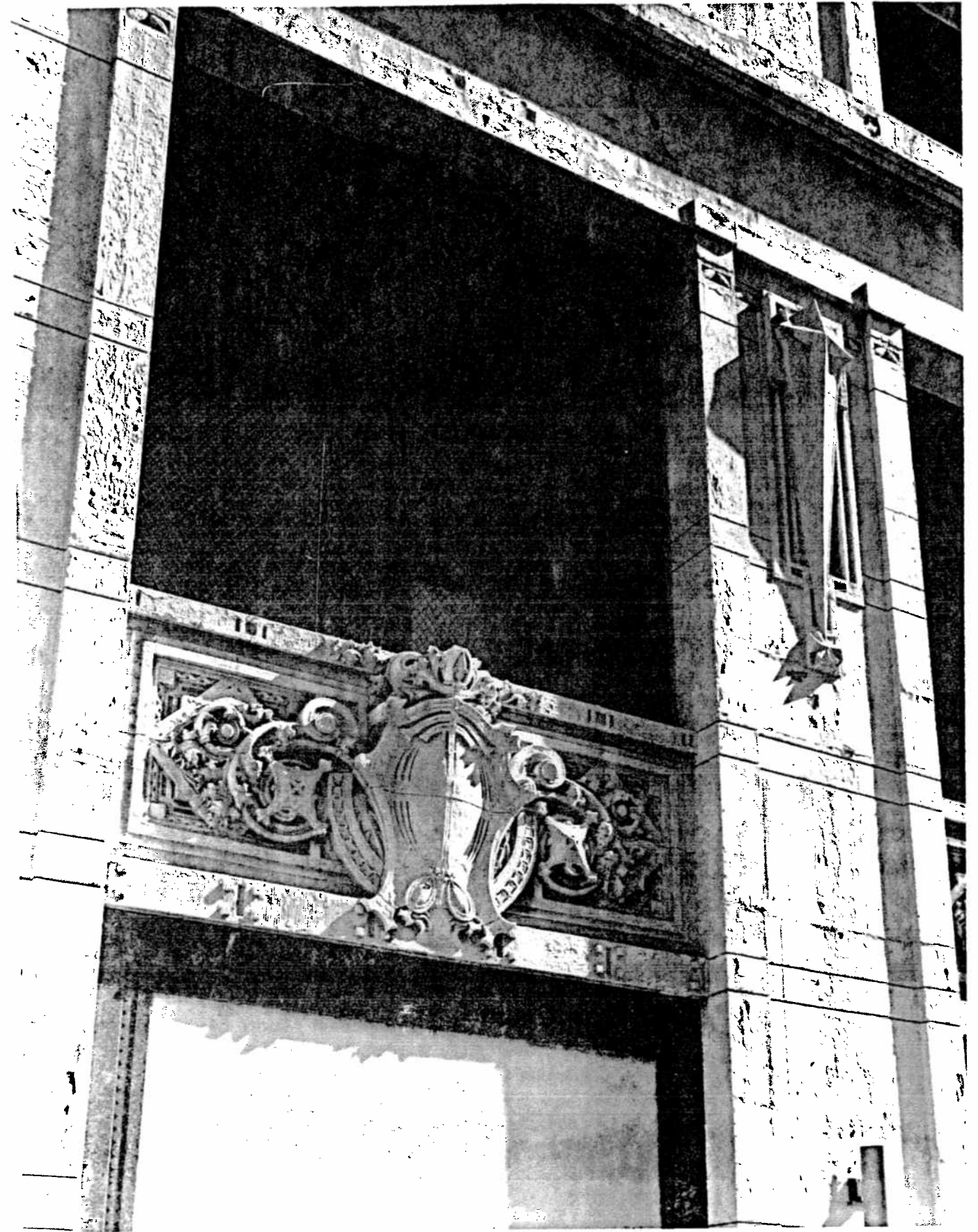
(Bob Thall, photographer)



OPPOSITE:

The piers and spandrels of the first and second floors are highlighted with sculptural ornamentation in terra cotta. Derived from Louis Sullivan, the character of the ornament combines natural and stylized abstract forms with a variety of repeated curvilinear and floral motifs.

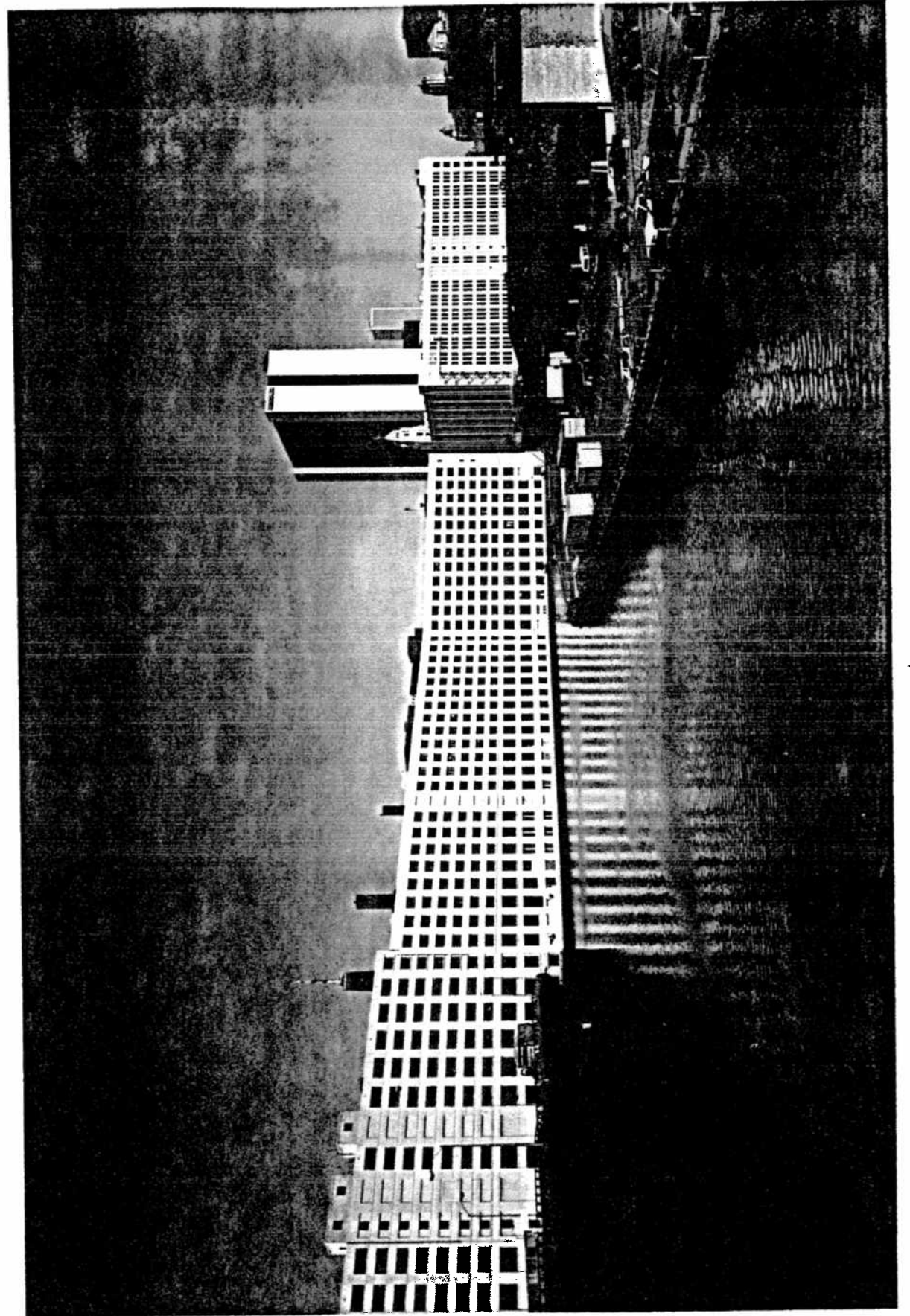
(Bob Thall, photographer)



OPPOSITE:

A long-standing and dominant feature of the river bank,
the Montgomery Ward and Company Warehouse bands the
curve of the Chicago River as it branches north.

(Bob Thall, photographer)





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